

Article

Religious Education and Its Interaction with the Spiritual Dimension of Childhood: Teachers' Perceptions, Understanding and Aspirations

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Abstract: In England, religious education (RE) is a part of the basic curriculum mandatory for all pupils in the compulsory years of schooling. This paper explores how RE and spirituality interact and whether one can contribute to the effective delivery of the other. It explores the experience of a small group of subject leaders working in schools in one local authority area in the West Midlands of England, drawn from schools with a religious affiliation and those without. Using in service training activities, questionnaires and reflective processes, it seeks to elicit their aspirations for the interaction between RE and spirituality (also referred to as meaning-making). The findings suggest the subject leaders have an intention to develop both activity to promote learning and activity to apply that learning to real life experience. This suggests that developing a spiritual dimension to religious education requires a move from the abstract or theoretical and from knowledge acquisition towards increased engagement, making a personal response and considering what difference can be made as a result. As such, a spiritual dimension to learning cannot be passive. The project has the potential to impact policy and practice on both national and international levels, given its focus on values and pedagogy rather than specific curriculum content.

Keywords: religious education; children's spirituality; subject leadership; in service training and development; curriculum; values; childhood



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1. Introduction

In England, religious education is a part of the basic curriculum offered during a child's years of compulsory schooling. Its inclusion stems back to the Education Act of 1944, and, although the curriculum has been revised and reworked significantly in the years since, it still remains a key element often debated and questioned. Beyond that is a longer history of schooling provided by religious organizations and, notably, the Church of England. In other settings around the world, religious education and education about religions has a varied profile and still can be controversial and contested in relation to its inclusion in schooling and educational settings. Add to that debate the element of the spiritual dimension of childhood, which can relate to all aspects of the formal and informal curriculum, including music, drama, literature, relationships education and an exploration of scientific endeavour, and the discussion becomes even more complex and diverse. Whether through a sense of awe and wonder for the natural world (Adams et al. 2008; Nye 2009), an appreciation of philosophical and humanist perspectives on life and living, an understanding of sustainable development and global citizenship or a sense of active citizenship and human rights (Cole 2011; Watson 2017), developing an understanding of the interaction between religious education and children's spirituality provides a distinctive opportunity to contribute both to the enhancement of the curriculum and the nurturing of children and young people (Adams et al. 2008; de Souza 2016). Some frame this in terms of contributing to education about 'worldviews' (Benoit et al. 2020).

What teachers perceive as ‘spiritual’ can vary considerably; at times it can be elusive, complex or indefinite. For some, it relates to a sense of the interconnectedness of people in diverse places (Mason and Woolley 2019), this might include, for example, an understanding of the South African concept of *Ubuntu* (Harber and Serf 2007), where one’s humanity is appreciated through interaction with others. In translation, perhaps it is best understood as: ‘I am because we are.’ In other words, I understand myself through my inter-relatedness with others and the multifaceted nature of my identities. For some, spirituality has a religious dimension (Lawson and May 2019) or helps to deepen a holistic understanding and development of childhood and young people (Adams 2017; Adams et al. 2016), which may be linked to an understanding of ‘religiosity’ (Eaude 2019). For others, it enables children to begin to make sense of their life experiences (Watson 2017). Of course, others do not feel that spirituality need have a link to religion (Selvam 2013). Research indicates that, for some trainee and early career teachers, for example, the prospect of exploring issues relating to religion and spirituality causes apprehension (Hill 2018; Woolley 2010) and requires appropriate training and preparation. This makes the case for exploring the interaction between religious education and children’s spiritual development all the more necessary.

1.1. Linkages between Spirituality and Religion

The linkage between spirituality and religion is complex and often contested. In the school system in England, the two are addressed separately, namely, through spiritual, moral, social and cultural education (SMSC) and religious education (RE), both of which are mandatory aspects of the curriculum. The former is a well established element within the National Curriculum (DfE 2013), the latter a part of the basic curriculum stemming originally from the 1944 Education Act, with syllabi designed on a regional basis by Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACRE). The regional nature of RE was intended to represent local needs and variation in demographic by religious belief and ethnicity. This may, in the present day, be felt to be outdated in a world that functions on global connections and communication.

As has been argued elsewhere (Adams et al. 2008), there is no single definition of spirituality. However, key points of description or summary can provide a way forward when considering its nature. First, spirituality is not synonymous with religion. Indeed, ‘spirituality is the primordial experience of human beings, out of which a religious response or a religious tradition may emerge’ (Adams et al. 2008, p. 23). Spirituality is diverse and ethereal. O’Donnell (2020) describes it as being like trying to hold water in one’s hands. He also argues that spirituality is more than the religious, and is indeed an essential part of being a human being. Spirituality is, thus, intrinsically about interconnectedness: between persons, individuals and their environment and perhaps even humans and an intangible ‘otherness’ of which some people have a sense (for example, in a conception of the divine).

In the present day, many people would describe themselves as being spiritual, but not religious. ‘Spirituality is an *inward directed search of oneself*, and also emphasizes the importance of *external expressions* and the interpersonal communications that exist between oneself and others, the community, and the world’ (Shi 2020, p. 113). This is reminiscent of the work of Hay and Nye (2006), which has been influential in defining the nature of the spiritual development of young people. For them, spirituality is in essence relational, based around four categories of spiritual relationships: child–God, child–people, child–world, and child–self. This is also reflected in the Taxonomy of Relationships developed by Mason and Woolley (2019), which focusses on levels of inter-relationship between persons. We suggest that this taxonomy (Figure 1) can be further enhanced by the inclusion of the spiritual dimension of human existence. Pervading all the relationships detailed in the taxonomy, from the stranger or ‘distant other’ (the person one may never meet but who grows the food and weaves the clothes we rely on in life on a daily basis) to the intimacy of close personal friendships (including those with a formal legal or religious commitment, for example, a civil partnership or marriage) is a sense of ‘otherness,’ which may be framed as the spiritual, the transcendent, Nature, God or some inexpressible intangible connection.

This intangible connection links all aspects of the cosmos and the interrelationship between persons, creatures, objects, places and all other elements of human experience across space and time. Perhaps this is what the hymn-writer Matthew Bridges (1800–1894) meant in the term ‘ineffably sublime.’ This ineffable connection is not restricted to those with an affiliation to a particular religious tradition or structure. For many people, the sense of connectedness and relationality to others (as illustrated in Mason and Woolley’s taxonomy) transcends any sense of the formal structures of any organisation, tradition or belief system. ‘Spirituality may be considered a natural predisposition of the human person’ (Adams et al. 2008, p. 23); it is a fundamental part of each person’s being: as such, it is ontological.

Whilst the debate around the definition and nature of spirituality remains complex, key commonalities have emerged in most definitions. In a review of definitions of spirituality, Weathers et al. (2015) found three shared defining attributes: relationship/connectedness; transcendence/being embedded in something greater than the self; and the search for meaning in life (including, for some people, the sacred). Watson (2017, p. 10) describes this spiritual dimension of life as, ‘[helping] individuals create frameworks of meaning and [providing] individuals with a way of being in the world which influences their decisions and actions. It enables them to interpret their life experiences . . . ’ This is echoed by de Souza’s (2016, p. 127) notion that spirituality is fundamentally about ‘relationality, identity and connectedness.’

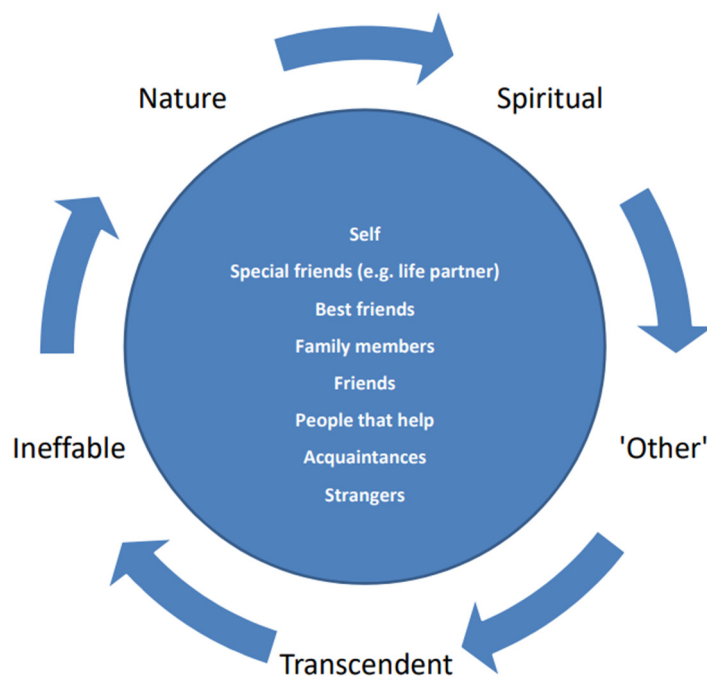


Figure 1. Mason and Woolley’s (2019) Taxonomy of Relationships, adapted.

1.2. Cultural Definitions and the Spiritual Journey

Adams et al. (2008, p. 146) argue that cultural definitions and understandings of spirituality also add further shades of grey to the process of recognising spiritual experiences: ‘As the world becomes increasingly globalized and different cultures mix on the streets, in parks and playgrounds, offices and classrooms, different perceptions of spirituality will be thrown into the mix.’ This requires adults to be increasingly aware of the different forms of spiritual expression that children may show. Eaude (2019) has argued that understanding children’s spirituality requires an appreciation and assessment of what and how children create meaning and construct their identities. This requires attentiveness and careful listening on the part of the adult, whether parent/carer or educator/teacher.

Writing in the context of Taiwan, [Shi \(2020\)](#) suggests that spiritual education is about an individual's journey of self-discovery, the development of their sense of identity and an appreciation of their sense of worthiness. This may be accompanied by the accumulation of religious knowledge about religions, but has a more profound element relating to self-awareness. Again, this has a focus on the development of one's relationships with others ([Shi 2020](#)) as a part of one's inner search for meaning in life:

Spirituality is not a learnt knowledge, but a method of accessing one's potential. It is a process of acquisition by familiarising oneself with an inner communication and an outer expression. The inner 'search' of truth forms an important part of the spiritual development process. This provides meaning to life and purpose of living. ([Shi 2020](#), p. 92)

Writing in the context of Australia, [Hyde \(2008\)](#) describes young people's approaches to the spiritual dimension as being about questing; a weaving of the threads of meaning. This weaving involves asking deep questions about life and living, about the world around them and care for the planet and its future, relationships, relatedness, social justice and qualities. Further, [Hyde \(2008\)](#) writes about children weaving these threads of meaning as they use their sense of awe to create their worldview and express their spirituality. He argues that spirituality is more primal than institutional religion, and that it is explored and expressed through social interactions with others. Citing [Fisher \(1999\)](#), [Elton-Chalcraft \(2002\)](#) and [Tacey \(2003\)](#), Hyde argues that spirituality is concerned with an individual's sense of connectedness with self, others, the cosmos and possibly with the Transcendent. He argues that children are natural philosophers, engaging with life's bigger questions, and that their natural sense of wonder provides opportunities for them to begin to develop a sense of meaning for themselves. Religious education must, therefore, allow children to develop their own worldview, rather than imposing existing structures and strictures from organised religion. This requires teachers of religious education to be perceptive ([Hyde 2008](#)), open to hearing and learning about the worldviews of the children in their care. This is about making the invisible realm of children's spirituality increasingly visible: 'adults need to become more aware and perhaps more open to the many varied forms it can take—not simply through expressions of 'spiritual experiences' such as dreams or encounters with deceased relatives, but also those other aspects . . . such as the search for identity' ([Adams et al. 2008](#), p. 146).

1.3. *Polarising Religion and Spirituality*

Of course, decoupling religion and spirituality brings its own complexities. [Zinnbauer and Pargament \(2005\)](#) question the usefulness of polarising spirituality and religious expression and suggest two definitions that complement each other by saying that the spiritual quest can take place outside of religion, but that spirituality is, at the same time, the core of religion:

Spirituality is a broader term than religiousness. Spirituality includes a range of phenomena that extends from the well-worn paths associated with traditional religions to the experiences of individuals or groups who seek the sacred outside of socially or culturally defined systems. (p. 36)

Furthermore,

Religiousness represents a broader phenomenon than spirituality, one that is concerned with all aspects of human functioning, sacred and profane. (p. 37)

This interplay between religion and spirituality is complex, but engaging in the debate helps to enrich an understanding of the complementary yet distinctive concepts.

1.4. Making Religious Education Relevant

Writing in the context of Catholic education in Australia, [Rossiter \(2010\)](#) proposes that, in order to make religious education more relevant to young people, there is a need to acknowledge that, for them, the norm is a largely secular spirituality, noting the increasing differentiation between spirituality and religion.

[Casson and Cooling \(2020\)](#) assert that 'Religious Education holds a unique position in a post-secular culture as it offers significant space and time within the curriculum, where young people can draw on the resources of faith and belief traditions, to explore and discover meaning, discuss existential questions and consider the responses of the religious traditions.' Further, [Casson and Cooling \(2020, unpaginated\)](#) argue that: 'If we think of young people as spiritual bricoleurs then the significance of RE as space of encounter becomes apparent; it is where students encounter the existential questions, are offered a variety of responses to these questions and have an opportunity to reflect on them'.

[Erricker \(2001\)](#) draws parallels between the formal structures of religion and those of the education system. Both have elements of social control, compliance and providing a structure that promotes self-discipline and restraint. Spirituality, however, 'is a process of inquiry into ourselves and our relations with others that is not constrained by a pre-imposed conformity' ([Erricker 2001, p. 34](#)). [O'Donnell \(2020\)](#) reflects on the regimented nature of schooling, and suggests that spirituality is more akin to the genie in the bottle: once released, there is no recapturing, 'what cannot be contained cannot be regimented' ([2020, p. 212](#)). Erricker challenges educators to think beyond this regimentation, adding a spiritual dimension to learning and the school experience, as '... while at present, we dance something akin to the rhythm of the military two step, we might consider learning to tango or go to a rave, if we wish; and consider it educationally justified.' ([Erricker 2001, p. 34](#))

1.5. Religious Education in Context

[O'Donnell \(2020\)](#) notes that spirituality is much more than about one curriculum subject. He sees spirituality as being a part of the RE curriculum but overlapping it and, indeed, appearing across the school curriculum and in the values and ethos of a school. The research carried out in this project focussed specifically on RE and the work of those leading the subject in schools. The participants were all based in one local authority area, and thus shared a common curriculum for religious education developed for the local SACRE.

Using this one local authority area as an example, in Worcestershire, UK, the Locally Agreed Syllabus for RE ([Worcestershire County Council 2020](#)) includes an appendix providing guidance on how spirituality can be integrated and allied to the subject. Parallel to the assertion by O'Donnell, it identifies that:

the 'spiritual' should not be confused with 'religious'. Spiritual development refers to the aspects of the child's spirit which are enhanced by school life and learning, and may describe the 'spirit' of determination, sharing or open-mindedness. Spiritual development describes the ideal spirit of the school. ([2020, p. 148](#))

This can be achieved through a focus based on the elements included in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Key elements for promoting spirituality through religious education. Taken from: [Worcestershire County Council \(2020\)](#) Worcestershire Agreed Syllabus 2020–2025. Worcester: Worcestershire SACRE (p. 149).

Self-awareness	Offering opportunities for pupils to reflect on their own views and how they have been formed, as well as the views of others
Curiosity	Encouraging pupils' capacity for critical questioning, such as by keeping big questions in a 'question box' or as part of a wall display, and allowing time and space where these questions can be addressed to show that they are important
Collaboration	Utilising lesson techniques that engender group collaboration and communication such as community of enquiry/P4C, circle time, debates, Socratic circles or group investigations
Reflection	Providing a space to reflect on pupils' own values and views, as well as those of others, and to consider the impact of these values
Resilience	Promoting a spirit of open enquiry into emotive or complicated questions, in order to learn how to cope with difficult ideas when they arise in the future
Response	Exploring ways in which pupils can express their responses to demanding or controversial issues
Values	Promoting an ethos of fairness and mutual respect in the classroom and compassion and generosity in pupils through exploring inspiring examples of these qualities in others
Appreciation	Encouraging pupils' ability to respond with wonder and excitement by exploring some of the marvels and mysteries of the natural world, of human ingenuity, and examples of the capacity of humans to love, create, organise and overcome adversity

In essence, a significant number of these elements (Table 1) relate more to the ethos (or spirit) of the school than any sense of an ineffable, intangible, ethereal sense of spirituality that may involve a sense of interconnection through nature, a sense of the divine, or an understanding of a link through shared humanity or inhabitation of the planet. This example, whilst local in its focus, provides a curriculum backdrop to the context in which the teachers in this study were working. Interestingly, the document was written by national organisation *RE Today* for Worcestershire County Council. This reflects the growing move to national documentation for the subject developed by subject associations, moving away from the intention for regional provision established in the 1944 Education Act (and repeated in subsequent Acts). The document was developed at the time when the research with leaders of religious education for this project was being undertaken. One may question how the elements in Table 1 differ from those that can be explored in any curriculum subject, and, thus, whether RE makes any significant or distinctive addition to a child's education. This was a key area that the data analysis in this project sought to explore. Of course, it is important to note that children's spirituality can be promoted or nurtured through a development of holistic education, with spirituality as a part of this process (Bigger 2003). According to Bigger (2003), spiritual development can come from various avenues such as music and the arts, and science and literature. In this paper, the focus is to see whether RE has a distinctive contribution to make.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Of the ten schools invited to take part in this project, seven responded and engaged with the project. The seven RE subject leaders in these schools (one male and six female) came from a mixture of state funded primary schools, three from schools with a religious

character (affiliated to the Church of England) and four from schools that do not have a religious character.

2.2. Antecedents and Purpose

In both 2007 and 2010, Ofsted (the national inspectorate for Education in England) identified that religious education was a subject in need of development. The reports showed that six out of ten schools were not providing RE that was rated as good or better. Only half of RE subject leaders were assessed as being good or outstanding and the reports identified that teachers lacked confidence in the subject (Ofsted 2007, 2010). Much attention has been given to developing the subject through research and creation of new documentation and this project sought to evaluate the good practice in schools in a local authority (LA) area in the West Midlands of the UK, and to empower RE subject leaders to promote and develop RE in their wider networks.

This project aimed to develop the knowledge, confidence and ability of the RE subject leaders. It ran for a year with an initial induction followed by termly contact days and activities in between these. This model was employed as programmes that last through a school year are shown to be more effective than disposable one or two day programmes (Gerard et al. 2011).

Building on the work of Howe and Stubbs (1997), which found that teacher changes in pedagogy resulted from constructing their knowledge in a supportive, social context with time included for reflection and revision, the research undertaken in the project presented in this paper sought to evaluate the changes in pedagogy and confidence through initial questions and ongoing diaries. A final focus group provided summative commentary.

2.3. Design, Resources and Procedure

A small scale qualitative inquiry was planned to capture the views of RE subject leaders, who took part in a project to develop and share excellent RE in Worcestershire primary schools. Qualitative research seeks to enable people to 'make sense of their ideas and experiences' (Savin-Baden and Major 2012, p. 11), always considering the point of view of the participant (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The intended focus of the inquiry was to establish the impact of engaging with research and pedagogical training over a year long project. Ten schools in the county were invited to take part (five schools with a religious character and five schools that did not have a religious character), and were informed that, in accepting the invitation, they would indicate their engagement with the project both as a learning opportunity and as consent to being part of the research project. The schools and the subject leaders were informed of the aims and purposes of the research. Supply costs (i.e., cover for teaching duties) were provided by the project funding. Seven schools joined the project, with three of the subject leaders from schools with religious character and four from schools that do not have a religious character.

The project involved 3.5 face to face days with reflective tasks undertaken alongside. On each day, the group was introduced to theory and teaching and learning ideas. An initial questionnaire was completed by the subject leaders in the first session. The questions asked them to reflect on their goals for the project: as a professional; for their pupils; for their school; for their wider networks; and for them as a person. Participants created a code for their questionnaire so that it remained anonymous and neither they nor their school could be identified. This also meant that they had the right of withdrawal of their data. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Worcester Ethics Committee. Photovoice was used in the second session (Wang and Burris 1997; Aurini et al. 2016). Each subject leader was asked to take photographs in their school of what made them proud of their work, how the values of their environment were shown and what learning in RE was like. They brought the photographs into the session on a large piece of display paper and we walked around the room reflecting on the images, and commenting by writing on post-it notes, in silence.

In the final session the subject leaders undertook a written personal reflection of the project responding to questions. The personal reflections were discussed in the group using Kolb’s model of reflection to encourage peer supported reflective practice (Kolb 2015). The questions asked were:

- what makes you proud of your work?
- how have you shared knowledge and influenced colleagues?
- what RE pedagogies have you tried?
- where next?

Each time the project group met, a different piece of research was discussed and taken away. On day two, the toolkit entitled: RE-framing education about beliefs and practices in schools by the University of Cambridge/Woolf Institute (Earl 2015) was explored. The heart of the toolkit asks professionals to rethink why, how, and what we teach about our own and others’ beliefs and practices. Teachers, academics, and policymakers have contributed to this research based toolkit, discovering that what is lacking is a sound rationale for how to make these practices have meaning for all, with meaning-making being across beliefs and not just religious belief. The authors view the term spirituality as contentious, and, therefore, use the phrase meaning-making instead. They contend that we make meaning because we have experiences:

We live in increasingly multi-ethnic communities and have an increasingly globalised view of the world. So we can’t, any longer, stay in our own little meaning-making worlds and hope nobody will disturb our world views. We have to interact. To do this well we need to understand ‘the other’s’ beliefs and practices, encounter them and learn from those experiences. (Earl 2015, p. 9)

Using the lens of meaning-making, the following findings illustrate the experience and perception of the subject leaders involved in the project.

3. Findings

At the beginning of the project undertaken by the authors of this paper, subject leaders were asked to reflect on their goals for this project and the potential for the project to enhance meaning-making (spirituality) for their pupils, their school and themselves. They provided their responses using a questionnaire. The following tables show Subject Leaders’ responses aligned with the *Worcestershire Locally Agreed Syllabus for RE* (Worcestershire County Council 2020) elements.

When asked: ‘what are your goals for the project as a professional?’ participants reported a range of goals (Table 2). Two subject leaders identified values, whilst three mentioned RE directly. Subject Leader D mentioned beliefs and opinions that could align with both values and religiosity. One subject leader included SMSC specifically. Citizenship is also mentioned (Subject Leader A) and this response aligns with Subject Leader Ds goal for ‘deeper understanding of the world’.

Table 2. Meaning-making: aligned with *self-awareness and reflection*.

Subject Leader A	Better understanding of RE and values and why they need to learn RE
Subject Leader A	Supporting citizenship
Subject Leader B	Increase pupil exposure to SMSC/RE/values in their community
Subject Leader D	Deeper knowledge of the world around them
Subject Leader D	Understanding of others’ beliefs and opinions
Subject Leader F	Children to make sense of their learning in RE

By asking the question: ‘what are your goals for the project personally?’, subject leaders anticipated a growth in knowledge and confidence, with two participants reflecting on the impact of their own growth on others (Table 3). Specifically, Subject Leader G looked outwards, wanting to have ‘a positive impact on all schools involved’. This links

to reflection on one’s values and a beneficent approach to the role of the RE teacher. The essence of personal spirituality versus the spirituality within RE are reported by Subject Leader B who responds with ‘commitment to the subject’s growth’ whilst Subject Leader C reflects on ‘opportunities to further personal growth’.

Table 3. Personal development: aligned with *collaboration* and *reflection*.

Subject Leader A	Widen my understanding and knowledge in order for me to support others
Subject Leader B	Reflect on my own values/passion for RE/and commitment to the subject’s growth
Subject Leader C	Opportunities to further personal growth
Subject Leader E	To be more confident and feel totally competent
Subject Leader G	Experience leading a project and making it effective for all (and) have a positive impact on all schools involved

Subject leaders were asked to indicate what skills they might learn during the project (Table 4), as teachers and leaders. The quest for new ideas and resources in order to share best practice was a popular response (six of the participants articulated this). This illustrates curiosity for new understanding and knowledge for the classroom. In addition, Subject Leader A noted the desire to support others, and Subject Leader C wanted up to date research.

Table 4. Openness to learn about pedagogies and leadership: aligned with *curiosity* and *response*.

Subject Leader A Subject Leader G Subject Leader F	Share good practice
Subject Leader B Subject Leader D Subject Leader G Subject Leader F	Gain and build confidence and knowledge of different RE pedagogies/strategies
Subject Leader A	Support others
Subject Leader B	Reflect on my own values/passion for RE/commitment to the subject growth
Subject Leader B	Improve my knowledge of new resources and projects
Subject Leader C	Provide up to date research
Subject Leader D	Better teaching and learning
Subject Leader E	Give me fresh ideas that I can share

3.1. What Makes You Proud of Your Work?

When asked ‘what makes you proud of your work?’ respondents mentioned the reinforcement of values:

I’m proud that our displays reflect learning and values. (Subject Leader A)

I’m proud that we are allowing children to learn life skills and values outside of English and maths! Providing children with opportunities to self-reflect and develop as a global citizen. [We are] allowing children to explore their own faith or ‘spiritual journey’. (Subject Leader B)

It is notable that skills relating to collaboration for meaning-making were proudly shared:

We undertook an RE day where the groups were mixed from reception to Year 5. It boosted confidence in the younger children and the older children could show caring and helpfulness. (Subject Leader A)

This aspect of the spirituality in meaning-making was evidenced further by Subject Leader E who acknowledged:

I'm proud of the enjoyment, everyone's attitude to this and developing new ideas for teaching and learning. Sharing with colleagues, sharing knowledge, supporting colleagues.

And also reflected in the response from Subject Leader F when they state:

Children are enjoying RE lessons, ideas, being creative, working together. Children are learning. Teachers want to teach RE. They enjoyed the lessons and how the children respond. And they come and ask advice.

In addition, curiosity, self-awareness and appreciation are shown through the eyes of Subject Leader G:

I'm proud of children's interest in the world and how they behave and are respectful and find awe and wonder when on trips and visits. They ask questions and want to know more; they value differences in each other and people and things they experience. I'm proud that I'm making a difference to pupils' knowledge and perception of the world. Helping them to find what is special about them and where they fit. Or the difference they can make within society and the world.

3.2. *Where Next?*

Subject Leaders' responses to the question *where next* are detailed below:

Through sharing ideas I'm planning in mind for this week of yoga, meditation, massage, et cetera. (Subject Leader A)

More opportunities for children across school to discover their own faith and link to their own values. How to use RE/values etc. to support children who are normally very unconfident or naughty. PSHE/virtues lead across an area. Keep developing my practise and knowledge by research and implementation so that my interest and passion for children understanding good values and the importance of their own faith can be explored. That for a broad range of pupils from a broader area can be exposed to good practice and more opportunities for self-reflection and self-development. (Subject Leader B)

New activities to inspire during RE lessons. (Subject Leader E)

Look at the values. How they are being taught and integrated in the school's curriculum and everyday life. (Subject Leader F)

4. Discussion

The most common responses referred to values or terms that align with values. In [Schwartz and Bilsky \(1987, 1990\)](#) and [Schwartz \(1992, 1994\)](#), Schwartz's theory of human values are presented and refined. Many more surveys and studies of human values have been undertaken by Schwartz and his colleagues to endorse this renowned and expansive theory. Interestingly, spirituality, whilst originally included as a universal value, was subsequently taken from the values model as it was not found universally in all cultures ([Hitlin and Piliavin 2004](#); [Schwartz 2012, 2017](#)). Such values are described as 'Values that represent the goal of finding meaning in life' ([Schwartz 1994](#), p. 26).

Towards the end of the project presented in this paper, subject leaders were asked about the impact of the project on them. They reported that they had shared resources and good practice across the project team, collaborating with other schools and reflecting on the effective RE in their schools and clusters. They had developed trusting relationships through their developed confidence to support others, for example, during an inspection by Ofsted. This had extended to practical ways to maintain collaboration through creating a drop box for shared communication and support between meetings. In relation to self-awareness, the subject leaders responded that they listened to the needs of others more and action planned accordingly. Reflection took place through writing in their own learning journals, a reflexive strategy to learn from and keep as a record ([Brown 2021](#), p. 5). Using this tool, subject leaders were asked to reflect individually on some final questions (as illustrated above in Sections 3.1 and 3.2) and, interestingly, these data are related to spirituality and RE.

Reflecting on these moments of pride illustrated the meaning-making that was taking place in schools within the project. The notion of pride, an intangible and emotional response to the activities, provides a sense of the spiritual dimension of the activities being undertaken between teachers and children. The subject leaders speak of enjoyment, and most note the benefit to the development of positive interactions and relationships between those involved. This is reminiscent of the spiritual element of *Ubuntu* (Harber and Serf 2007), explored earlier.

It is notable that the responses to the question *where next* detailed in Section 3.2 reflect an intention to develop both activity to promote learning and activity to apply that learning to real life experience. This suggests that developing a spiritual dimension to religious education requires a move from the abstract or theoretical and from knowledge acquisition towards increased engagement, making a personal response and considering what difference can be made as a result. As such, a spiritual dimension to learning cannot be passive.

This sense of the spiritual in RE stands in contrast to the recent Ofsted research review of the subject (Ofsted 2021). This identifies broad types of knowledge that form three pillars of progression:

- First, ‘substantive’ knowledge: knowledge about various religious and nonreligious traditions;
- Second, ‘ways of knowing’: pupils learn ‘how to know’ about religion and non-religion;
- Third, ‘personal knowledge’: pupils build an awareness of their own presuppositions and values about the religious and non-religious traditions they study (Ofsted 2021, online).

This report from Ofsted focusses particularly on the notions of religions and nonreligion, rather than any discussion of the spiritual dimension of either, or indeed of childhood. However it does note that in depth learning in RE ‘can explore the geographical, metaphysical and cosmological aspects of traditions’ (Ofsted 2021, online). Implicit to this, we argue, is an ineffable sense of the spiritual dimension.

5. Conclusions

This paper has explored the nature of both religious education and children’s spirituality in the context of a single local authority area in England. Both areas are a mandatory part of the school curriculum, the former being a part of the basic curriculum, and the latter included in the National Curriculum (DfE 2013). We have acknowledged that spirituality is hard to define, and that there are a variety of ways of understanding it. These vary both across and within geographical contexts and also change over time. The linkage between the two areas is complex and often contested. In an increasingly globalised world, children are encountering diverse cultures both in physical and virtual spaces. More than ever, this brings exposure to a range of beliefs, practices and spiritual experiences.

The sample size involved in this study was small, but it is important to note that participants were drawn from a group of specialists in their subject area. Thus, they bring particular insights and perspectives to the study. Key findings are that the participants noted the relational elements of the project being presented in this paper. When identifying their goals for the project, each one variously identified interactions between people, engagement with the wider world and the local community, and the ability to understand and appreciate these. Their goals for the project also focus on values, personal growth, building confidence and deepening understanding. These elements are all skills related and suggest that the experience will effect positive change in some regard.

The participants are proud of elements in their work that develop positive attitudes, promote interest from their pupils and stimulate creativity. Thus, they identify the potential for the development of a spiritual dimension within religious education as being fundamentally values focussed and transformative. This does not involve promoting any particular religious or faith perspective, but, rather, introducing an ethereal, ineffable element within

children's learning. Of course, this need not be restricted to within religious education, but is identified as such given the very specific focus of this research project.

The distinctive contribution of this paper is to explore the interplay between religious education and spirituality, an area neglected in current documentation developed by the national inspectorate, as indicated above (Ofsted 2021). Whilst specific to the context of England, the issues that have been highlighted are transferrable to a range of settings world-wide.

The research project undertaken by the authors has the potential to impact practice on both national and international levels. Given that it was not focussed on curriculum content, but rather values and attitudes, the focus is easily transferrable. The process of supported in service training coupled with activities to stimulate reflection provide a model that can be adapted in other settings, and, indeed, across other academic subjects. In terms of further research, it will be interesting to see how recent research reports on how the subject of RE (specific to England), which focus more on knowledge (in a variety of forms) about religion and non-religion, impacts on the way in which RE is taught and its potential to contribute to the spiritual dimension of childhood.

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